



What works? What fails?

FINDINGS FROM THE NAVRONGO COMMUNITY
HEALTH AND FAMILY PLANNING PROJECT



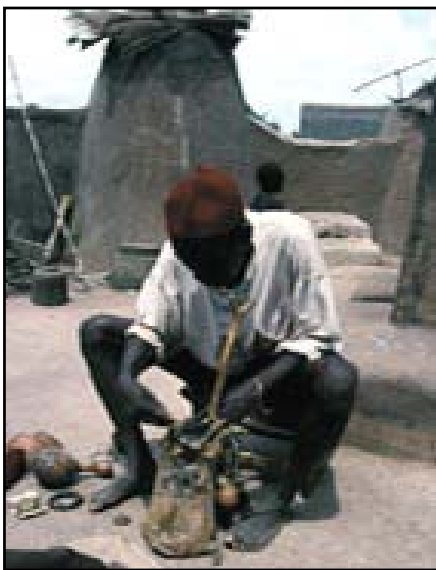
Vol. 2, No. 10, March 2002

Navrongo Health Research Centre

EVEN THE ANCESTORS WANT FAMILY PLANNING

The Kassena-Nankana of northern Ghana have no word for the supernatural; boundaries between reality and imagination do not exist. The gap between mortals and ancestral spirits is bridged by the medium of soothsaying. Every lineage is headed by a patriarch who practices religious rites for contacting spirits to explain events in the past, forecast the future, or guide decisions of current concern to families in the lineage. At the launching of the CHFP, it was expected that community members would consult the ancestors about the project. Since contraceptive use was uncommon in the Navrongo setting, it was assumed that ancestral consultation would lead men to reject family

planning. To explore this issue, social scientists from the NHRC compiled two matched interviews of male lineage heads. The first interview provided an indepth appraisal of the reproductive views and preferences of lineage heads. The second interview repeated these questions with the same individual through the medium of soothsaying, providing an appraisal of the views of ancestral spirits of nine lineages. Comparison of the responses permitted evaluation of the ancestors' role in family planning decisionmaking.



**Soothsayer preparing to meet
the dead on behalf of the living**

This investigation was based on the assumption that confronting spirits with fertility regulation, imported from abroad, and imposed without spiritual dialogue, risks cultural conflict and social imbalance. Ancestral spirits are believed to dwell on this earth through progeny. Services and themes of a family planning programme may represent more of an affront to culture than a service to society. It is thus reasonable to expect people to fear alien ideas that risk social and spiritual disruptions. Under such circumstances, programmes will be rejected unless themes and messages are pursued in consultation with the ancestral spirits of the communities served.

To ensure salience and sustain interest, a questionnaire administered in the investigation was kept short and focused on reproductive health preferences. The questions used were:

1. *Is it good for women in your lineage to have many children?*
2. *If you think about men in your lineage, do they have more children than they want, fewer children than they want, or just about the right number of children?*
3. *If you could start your family again, how many children would you have?*
4. *In this lineage, are big compounds better off than small compounds?*
5. *When babies are born in this lineage, is it better for a woman to have a boy or a girl?*
6. *Some men and women use methods to delay or avoid a pregnancy. In general, do you approve or disapprove of couples in this lineage using a method of family planning?*
7. *A project has been launched in this village to provide men and women with health care and family planning. Will this programme help your lineage in the future? Are there ways in which the programme is bad for your lineage?*

Soothsaying sessions were dominated by ritual incantations for arousing the ancestors. Contrary to expectations that responses would be homogeneous, responses reflect considerable diversity of opinion, and often, the ancestors were more open to family planning than the lineage head.

The following is typical of the responses to the question, *Is it good for women in your lineage to have many children?*

Lineage head: *I would like each and every one of the women to have children, but I do not intend to*

let them have too many children, because it would be good to have the number of children that you would be able to take good care of.

Ancestor: *The ancestors say that it is now difficult to get an education as well as to do farming. If...a problem crops up, and the child is sick, then money is everything. You have to buy medicine, and even if you go to the herbalist, you need to take a fowl along for treatment...It is no longer the same as in the olden days, when everyone did farming.*

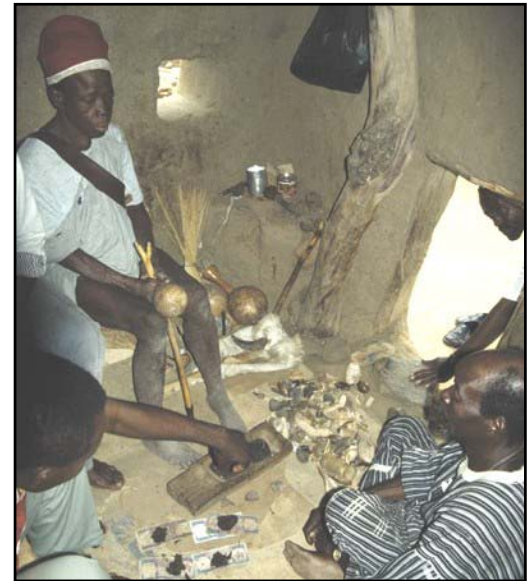
Some even appear to be more concerned about the consequences of having many children than the lineage head:

Lineage head: *I would like them to have many children because it is a large following that makes one a chief.*

Ancestor: *The ancestors would like them to have three children each. One would be your mother, one your father, and the other your child. (After probing:) They would like everybody to have a small number of children, but they should not refuse to have children altogether.*

In fact, it was learned that while ancestors may have a role in a man's deliberations about the timing of childbearing, they are not consulted about preventing pregnancy. Family planning is something that is nontraditional, so tradition does not enter into decisions about it. As one young man stated:

It is left with you and your wife to come together into agreement before you go to see the person who will help you to practice the method. There is no libation pouring in this decision. You both have to understand each other before you go for the family planning.



Ancestors are not shy about speaking through female soothsayers

Numerous sociodemographic studies in sub-Saharan Africa have been directed to interviewing the living about their reproductive norms and aspirations. The Navrongo study was the first to involve respondents who are deceased. Findings suggest that religious practices are flexible and adaptive to social change. The cult of soothsaying is not emphatically pronatalist and should not be viewed as a social force that is fundamentally aligned against the family planning programme. Organizers of family planning programmes may encounter incidents whereby village events are interpreted by soothsayers, but the programme itself will not be the subject of soothsayer-mediated spiritual review and consultation. The influence of traditional religion on reproductive behaviour is often characterized in the international social science literature as constraining reproductive change, as if African religious values are somehow anti-modern or are reactionary social influences which must be subverted if family planning programmes are to succeed. Navrongo research shows that ancestors are far more accommodating to new ideas about reproduction and family planning than conventional perspectives in the literature portray. Health and family planning programmes can be developed in partnership with traditional religious leaders and in concert with traditional religious practices and precepts.



Summoning the ancestors through ritual incantations

Send questions or comments to: What works? What fails?

Navrongo Health Research Centre, Ministry of Health, Box 114, Navrongo, Upper East Region, Ghana

What_works?@navrongo.mimcom.net

This series has been launched to share experiences with people in Ghana and elsewhere around the world about what has worked and what has failed in an experiment to make primary health care widely accessible to rural people. The Kassena-Nankana community, whose active participation made *The Navrongo Experiment* possible, are hereby duly acknowledged. This publication was made possible through support provided by the Office of Population, Bureau for Global Programs, Field Support & Research, U.S. Agency for International Development, under the terms of Award No. HRN-A-00-99-00010. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development. Additional support was provided by a grant to the Population Council from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.